Tourism in Iran: a brief review of shortcomings and strengths

This is an outline of a workshop held at the Azad University Oloum va tahghighat Department in Tehran for students of tourism on 22 October 2009, by Roya Arab (Honorary Research Assistant Institute of Archaeology, UCL).

The students were initially invited to offer their thoughts on the following questions:

- What is tourism and what do tourists seek?
- Name the best tourist destinations and sites in the world?
- Where in Iran have we got culture/heritage/nature to offer?
- Who is the audience you anticipate in Iran?

This was followed by a slide show of interesting sites for travel, including Morocco, Belgium, Corfu and the Czech Republic, which were discussed. After the slides, there was a lecture (see below). It must be noted here, that each of the subheadings below could have been the subject of a seminar, but time restrictions allowed us only a brief overview of the varied forms of tourism available to international tourists and a cursory exploration of Iran’s shortcomings and strengths in catering for these different groups.

Tourism and Iran

Tourism has emerged as a successful player in the global industries of the twentieth Century. There is a major disparity between Iran’s capability as a major tourist attraction and the reality of sorely depleted international interest in Iran as a possible tourist destination. Let us do a survey of the different modes of tourism available globally and briefly explore Iran’s ability to cater to the varied international tourists.

- Activity/adventure holidays… Walking, Cycling, Mountaineering, Sailing, and Outdoor activities. Iran has a vast amount of natural landscapes, but a shortfall in experienced/multilingual guides trained in these varied outdoor activities, and the tourist set up to cater for this group. Showers, toilets and basic campsite facilities need to be provided at sites, alongside trained personnel to guide these groups.

- Backpackers/students… Often students and sometimes older long term travellers, travelling across continents - they have low budgets, are often experienced and very adept at utilising buses, trains and local transport to travel across a country. I am always struck during visits to Iran at the number of such travellers who make their way across Iran. This is a major market, as often these groups travel at all times of the year and are not restricted by general propaganda that goes on about the East in the West. By and large, Iran with its many guesthouses and good transport links is very good for this market.

- Beach/Sun holidays… being able to sunbathe, consume alcohol and food. These groups are made up of families/couples/single people: they require amusement and concessions for a wide range of ages, tastes and a degree of social freedom that Iran with its Islamic code cannot cater for. There are different classes of sun seekers; however, generally these people are going away to rest and have fun; indigenous culture and landscapes feature little on their timetable.

- Culture… Archaeological sites, Museums, Anthropological (the varied cultural landscape), and Gastronomic features are what cultural tourists seek. Iran is very strong in its cultural offerings, spanning over 5 millennia, from Shahr-e Sokhte to Elam and Persepolis, all the way
through to Saffavid gardens and architecture. There are archaeological sites, museums, poetic
arquitecture, and internationally renowned Iranians through the ages, from poets to
astronomers, mystics, medicine men and great kings - Hafez, Omar Khayam, Rumi, Abo Sina
(Avicenna) and Cyrus the great are but a few. These personalities feature alongside ancient
villages and landscapes, which provide many before unseen life ways.

All this Iranian history presents a wealth of interest for the culturally minded. However,
Iranian museums and sites are very far behind in terms of presentation, preservation and
accessibility. Efforts need to be made at the important sites to provide leaflets and information
in different languages. Presentation of artefacts and the text provided also need to be updated
and again the issue of translation, which is poor across the sites and museums I have visited
over the years. A programme for a twinning of sorts with museums around the world, with
special offers for their members, can be developed, which coupled with academic exchanges
would provide a good resource for helping develop the sites and museums.

There is also the ancient cuisine of Persia/Iran, the Greeks wrote copiously on Persian food,
eating rituals and the encouragement of chefs to invent dishes, this alongside the delights of
Gaz, Bakhlava, Sohan, Cake-e Yazdi and a myriad of other delicacies, make gastronomic
tours around Iran for international food lovers a viable option. A tour of sites where
specialties are made, with master classes in Iranian cuisine: such as fesenjoun (walnut and
pomegranate stew), khouresht-e sabzi (herb and lamb stew), or the vegetarian kashk-e
bademjan (aubergene and whey) or koukou sabzi & sabzi polo (herb rice and herb omelette)
are but a few of the foods our friends cited as favourites after years of eating our mother’s
Iranian food in London. Persian/Iranian cuisine is highly underrated, and we need to raise the
profile of this national treasure.

Old architecture is disappearing fast, except for in cities such as Yazd, and old life-ways
with it, we have to make an effort to maintain life in the countryside – in the very least
preserve parts of it as cultural heritage, which can be sustained through tourism. As with all
nations Iran is seeing a migration pattern that favours urban spaces, especially as the younger
generations move out and country life slowly ebbs away. Our old bathhouses, which are fast
disappearing, are the genesis of a great idea for tourists, the sefid-aab and Kee-se (special
loafer and washing paste) can easily compete with the best body scrubs in spas across Europe
and hammams which feature in countries such as Turkey and Morocco. Utilise the mud and
salts of the Urmia Lake and you have the softest of skins and a cure for eczema and psoriasis.
Creating old style bathhouses and offering spa like treatments using our ancient bathing
traditions and healing mud and salts would be successful I am sure.

Iran has many untapped resources for tourism. Heritage and culture are Iran’s greatest
offerings and are areas that really need working on, both within Iran through improving
cultural sites, but also through strengthening cultural ties abroad.

-Eco-tourism… Open air spaces, Mountains, Lakes, sustainable impact on the environment,
tenting and camping possibilities. This group are relatively easy to provide for in a country
like Iran with its many sites of exceptional natural beauty including Marivan, lake Urumia,
and the Bakhtiari waterfalls and landscapes. All this natural bounty, alongside the many
traditional villages provide plenty of locations for catering to eco-tourists. These are sites
where families and groups could be offered the indigenous experience within natural setting,
or with tribes and within village houses. Scenic landscapes need to have facilities such as
showers, toilets, eating areas for campers, in tents and on wheels. Minimising adverse
environmental impact on the landscape and sustainability are essential features of this type of
tourism

-Education… A large number of students of the Persian/Iranian language, history and
culture, including Islamic art and architecture, are finding it hard to get into Iran. The School
of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS), sent its Farsi/Persian language students to
Afghanistan in 2008. Upon returning to SOAS, the students had to have their Afghani accents
corrected! How is it that a war torn country is more accessible for these foreign students than
Iran the country who’s language and culture they are studying. Government universities
should be offering places to these students and directing the funds raised from such ventures back into the country’s education system. They should also be setting up links with universities teaching Persian and Iranian related subjects to encourage student visits to Iran.

-Medical…Internationally increasingly high prices, lack of knowledge and medical facilities in different parts of the world is creating a host of medical tourists, for both cosmetic and medical surgery. Iran is generally respected in the region for its high calibre practitioners and compared to some of its immediate neighbours, modern facilities. Hospitals, medical staff and equipment are areas that need investing in, both for the indigenous population and as a viable means of attracting people to Iran. The monies gained from catering to the international medical tourists can be pumped back into the national health system.

-Religious tourism…Iran has a growing and impressive number of religious tourists, however, it does not cater for enough people. I have met many Muslims, who are eager to visit Iran’s shrines, but do not know how to go about it and are fearful of the images of Iran portrayed abroad. There need to be more international specialist companies providing (and advertising) pilgrims with safe and affordable travel to Iran’s religious shrines. The Muslim calendar means that there is often an upsurge of visitors followed by quite periods, perhaps companies should be offering special price packages in the months when fewer pilgrims travel.

-Shopping…For people who travel to purchase goods, Iran is strewn with artisans and crafts of the highest order, from rugs to metals, printing and woodworking; examples of these arts and crafts are being practiced and taught at the ICCHO offices near Azadi Square. Need one say more than Esfahan nesf-e jahan, (Esfahan, half the world), in the 15th century this magnificent city was at the centre of international trade, the walls still echo with the sounds of craftspeople weaving and hammering their magic into a wide array of materials. Efforts to publicise this magnificent national treasure of arts and crafts should be increased.

What tourist need:

Infrastructure--The tourist branch of the Iran Cultural Heritage & Tourism Organisation should be working hard to create multilingual pamphlets with travel and hotel information. Train and bus stations need to address the needs of foreign tourists with better signage and timetables, with booking methods made more easily available. Timetables, prices and ticket booking should be made available on the Internet. Perhaps an idea would be to set up a an ‘Iran travel’ web site, with all hotels, travel and other information and booking procedures made available on the net. A big project, but, one that ICHTO or a private company could manage in time. Travel shops at airports and major train/bus stations would also be beneficial, through providing guidance and booking services for transport and accommodation.

Services-- Iranian food we know is great, but we have yet to create indigenous tourist Menus. There are some adventurous types, however, most people want clean, well-priced, and accessible food, with well-translated menus including description of the meals. One complaint I often hear is the lack of juice bars, considering the wide range of fruit and vegetables available in Iran, it would be worth starting chains of fresh fruit juice outlets. Taxi fares need to be made transparent, list of set prices provided for journeys, so that tourists do not feel or get cheated.

Language-- There is clearly a problem with translations in Iran, from museums through to restaurants there are glaring errors to be found. There needs to be a concentrated effort to improve the language skills of tourist personnel, English, Spanish, Chinese, German and French, and Japanese are important and useful languages for catering to international tourists.
Ease of access--Visa applications and embassy procedures should be made more accessible and easy. Tourists do not want to spend hours at consulates or indeed wait up to (in cases) months for an entry visa into Iran.

Accommodation – This is one area Iran is very good in. There is a wide range of accommodation at varied price levels. However, again it is access to information and booking procedures that need to be improved.

Security--Governments have websites where they inform their populations of the destinations considered safe or unsafe for travel. In the case of Iran, being in a part of the world considered politically unstable, with occupied neighbours and ongoing threats of attack, result in it not appearing on the secure travel list of western government travel advice websites. A more friendly face from Iran would not go amiss, and efforts must be made to counter some of this propaganda, to ensure that tourists feel safe when they do travel to Iran, and also think about setting up an Internet forum, so that at least the public who have travelled to Iran can relay their fruitful experiences and can help allay fears.

In this piece, I have only taken a cursory look at Iran’s possibilities and shortcomings in catering to international tourists, and although national tourism in Iran is more developed, it would benefit from some of the above suggestions for improving tourism in Iran. Clearly the new millennium has provided new challenges for humanity, amongst these: global warming, rising commodity and food prices, Euro/American wars/invasions and so-called ‘Islamic Terrorism’. These are all having a marked influence on government policies, major industries and life ways of people across the globe. In the face of such rapid changes and consequences on so many levels of existence, the outcomes are not easy to qualify or quantify. In terms of tourism it would be fair to say that the Near East is suffering from the negative affects of the East/West struggle. Presently, many in the west are fearful of visiting Iran. This is stoked by the West’s antipathy towards the Iranian government and Iran’s leaders not always providing the friendliest face to the world at large. There needs to be a major effort by cultural staff in Iran to devise the means to counter some of the negative images portrayed of Iran. On a more positive note, in areas like eco-tourism and sustainable tourism Iran has a head start with its many untouched landscapes and cultures, which if developed and utilised well, would benefit tourism in Iran.

In the meanwhile, Iran should also concentrate on attracting its multiple neighbours in Asia, from former Soviet states which had affiliations to Iran - to India, China and Japan, these nations provide a great audience, and all but Japan have ancient cultural affiliations with Iran. A concentrated effort should be made to bring alive these contacts within and outside Iran. The Chinese have many written sources on their contacts with Iran since the Parthian era, many backed by archaeological evidence. A Sassanid King and his Nestorian bride settled in Xian 1400 years ago and were greeted and treated as nobility, Iran’s links with China are ancient. India’s contact with Iran cannot be underestimated, nor Iran’s cultural ties with its northerly neighbours. Equally, the Arabian tourists visit Islamic shrines, but there is a cultural level at which closer ties can be forged.

The themes that come through are lack of language skills, infrastructure and facilities, alongside insufficient training of tourism personnel to deal with tourists and the issue of services (food, presentation, taxis, price transparency) provided for foreigners. We need to set up a database where information can be stored about all the natural and cultural offerings, around Iran. Up to date records about the condition of these can be entered, which in itself would be a means of accounting for and monitoring the cultural and natural tourists assets of and for the nation. Iran has an impressive history as seen in countless monuments, supplemented by remarkable natural landscapes and living human cultures, it is a great pity that as a country it has been so left behind in the tourist industry; efforts must be made from within the country to redress this imbalance.